

Living in the Layers: A New Approach to Poetry  
March 13, 2011  
Benjamin Curran  
University Preparatory Academy  
Detroit, MI  
<http://thesmallnouns.blogspot.com>  
bcurran812@gmail.com

### **Part One: Reading Poems**

#### **My Poetry Rules:**

1. Poetry has no rules
2. Poems have no accidents
3. Poetry is everywhere
4. There are no wrong answers

#### **The Pleasures of Poetry:**

- Wisdom
- The Self (a poem speaks directly to you)
- The Anti-Self (a poem speaks things you wish you could say)
- Rhyme
- Sounds (Alliteration, Assonance, Consonance)
- Rhythm
- Repetition
- Structure—Stanza & Line Breaks
- Wordplay
- Comparisons (Metaphor & Simile)
- Personification
- Exaggeration
- Imagery
- Allusion
- Poignancy
- Wit & Humor

Adapted from *A Surge of Language* by Wormser & Cappella--

#### **Ten Questions to ask about words:**

1. What word intrigues you most?
2. Is there a word that confuses you?
3. What word surprises you?
4. What word seems most metaphorical?
5. Is there a word that seems unnecessary?
6. What word is most important?
7. What is the most physical word in the poem?
8. What is the most specific word in the poem?
9. What is the strongest sound word in the poem?
10. What is the most dynamic verb in the poem?

#### **Other sample poem questions:**

- How many sentences is the poem made up of?
- What happens in terms of structure in these sentences?
- What do the sentences have to do with one another? (e.g. relationship between the second and third?)
- What does this poem remind you of?
- What kinds of images are in the poem?
- How is punctuation used?
- What tense is used?
- Is it a narrative poem?
- What feeling does the poem leave you with? What causes that feeling?
- What makes it a complete poem?

- What is personified? Compared?
- What effect does the personification have? The comparison?
- What sounds are repeated? To what effect?
- What does the title have to do with the poem?
- Are the line breaks expected or unexpected?
- Are there any patterns? Does the pattern break anywhere?
- Is there a point where the poem “turns?”
- If the word \_\_\_\_ is removed, what difference does it make?
- What are the important adjectives/adverbs/verbs? Why is each important?
- Where is the lens focused? Close? Far? Does it move?
- Who is the speaker? How would you describe him/her?

## **Part Two: Poetry Writing**

### **Poetry Writing Activities:**

#### **CIRCLE POEMS**

A Circle Poem is about a single person place or thing. It is made up of one-word lines. The title “triggers” the first line of the poem. The first line “triggers” the second, and so on. At the end of the poem, the last line “circles” around, referencing the title in some way. The goal in writing a circle poem is surprise. Try to think of unexpected connections between your lines. Each word should be separated by an asterisk. This slows the reader down, forcing them to think carefully about how your lines are connected.

#### **2 WORD POEMS**

Focus on the way words go together. Add the element of surprise to your pair of words by thinking of unlikely connections.

#### **FOUND POEMS**

Poems that are created from sentences that you find, sentences that other people write and that the writer turns into a poem.

#### **LIST POEMS**

Using a list of anything—poem titles, first lines of poems, song titles, cereal names, etc.—arrange them into a poem.

#### **HAIKU & OTHER FORMS**

Write poems to fit strict forms such as haiku, sestina, ghuzal, villanelle, etc.

#### **LOSS POEMS**

Write a poem about something you’ve lost. You could: write a poem about the many things you have lost, a poem about one thing you’ve lost, a poem about losing a loved one, a poem that deals with LOSS in your own way.

#### **BITTERNESS POEMS**

A poem that illustrates bitterness, anger, protest or even hate.

#### **CHANGE POEMS**

A Change Poem describes something undergoing a change using one-word lines. The goal is to creatively explain how one thing changes into another.

#### **ODES/PRAISE POEMS**

Write a poem in praise of something. Odes often use flowery, awestruck and exaggerated language. (See Neruda’s “Ode to My Socks”)

#### **PERSONA POEMS**

Write a poem from the point of view of someone else—a person from history, a fictional character, an inanimate object, etc.

#### **SELF PORTRAIT POEMS**

Using Wallace Steven’s “13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” write a poem that describes yourself in 13 different ways.

#### VISUAL RESPONSE POETRY

Students write a poem inspired by a given image (photograph, digital image, artwork, real life situation/experience, etc.). Comment on the item's details. Or perhaps comment on what ISN'T there.

#### LOVE THAT DOG PROJECT

Pattern the poems (The Red Wheelbarrow, The Tyger, etc.) that are included in the story. Visit <http://bookclub21.wikispaces.com> and click Love That Dog for more.

#### WORDLE POETRY

Step One: take words from a poem of your choice. Step Two: Create a wordle at wordle.net. Step Three: Give that wordle to students and have them use all or some of the words in an original poem. Students can also make their own wordless to share with the class.

#### BOOK SPINE POEMS

Similar to a list poem...gather three or more books whose titles can fit together in a poetic way. Arrange them in order in a pile and take a picture of their spines. Voila! (For more see 100ScopeNotes.com)

#### MULTIMEDIA POETRY

Turn a famous poem into a movie that incorporates text, images, and sounds. Or do the same with an original poem. Use a program such as iMovie (Mac) or PhotoStory or Movie Maker (PC).

#### What if questions for revising poems:

- What if the poem were longer/shorter?
- What if more/less metaphor is used?
- What if one moment in the poem is expanded?
- What if more detail is used?
- What if the poem begins at a different place?
- What if the poem changes its point of view?
- What if the verb tense changes?
- What if more adjectives are used?
- What if more strong verbs are used?
- What if all abstract/subjective words are deleted?
- What if all the senses are used?
- What if the soundscape is intensified/lessened?
- What if form is used?
- What if the architecture (stanzas) changes?
- What if more/less punctuation is used?
- What if appositives are used?
- What if line lengths change?
- What if syntax is changed?
- What if fragments are used rather than complete sentences?
- What if questions are asked in the poem?
- What if the ending changes?

#### Poems to Pattern:

"This is Just To Say" by William Carlos Williams

"Alligator Pie" by Dennis Lee

"This Place" by Eloise Greenfield

"Afraid So" by Jeanne Marie Beaumont

"Between Walls" by William Carlos Williams (poetry walk)

"Things to Do if You are the Sun" by Bobbi Katz

"You Can't Have It All" by Barbara Ras

"Lullaby for a Daughter" by Jim Harrison

**Finding Poems on the Web:**

[www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)

[www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org)

[www.writersalmanac.org](http://www.writersalmanac.org)

<http://thesmallnouns.blogspot.com>

**The Best of My Poetry Bookshelf:**

Title	Author/Editor
The Dream Keeper	Hughes, Langston
An Invitation to Poetry	Pinsky, Robert
The Anthology: Poems for Poetry Out Loud	Stone, Dan and Young, Steven
Poetry Speaks Who I Am	Paschen, Elise
Falling Down the Page	Heard, Georgia
This Same Sky	Nye, Naomi Shihab
Poetry 180	Collins, Billy
180 More	Collins, Billy
The Tree That Time Built	Hoberman, Mary Ann
Adobe Odes	Mora, Pat
Neighborhood Odes	Soto, Gary
This Place I Know	Heard, Georgia
Hailstones & Halibut Bones	O'Neill, Mary
The Random House Book of Poetry	Prelutsky, Jack
The Flag of Childhood	Nye, Naomi Shihab
The Time You Let Me In	Nye, Naomi Shihab
A Child's Anthology of Poetry	Sword, Elizabeth Hauge
Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle	Dunning, Leuders, and Smith
Honeybee	Nye, Naomi Shihab
Heart to Heart	Greenberg, Jan
Fly With Poetry	Harley, Avis
Honey, I Love	Greenfield, Eloise
Poetry for Young Children series	Various

**Teaching Resources:**

Tsujimoto, Joseph. [Teaching Poetry Writing to Adolescents](#)

O'Connor, John. [Word Playgrounds](#)

Wormser, Baron and David Cappella. [A Surge of Language](#)

Koch, Kenneth. [Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?](#)

## Poems Used in the Presentation

"The Layers" by Stanley Kunitz

I have walked through many lives,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray.  
When I look behind,  
as I am compelled to look  
before I can gather strength  
to proceed on my journey,  
I see the milestones dwindling  
toward the horizon  
and the slow fires trailing  
from the abandoned camp-sites,  
over which scavenger angels  
wheel on heavy wings.  
Oh, I have made myself a tribe  
out of my true affections,  
and my tribe is scattered!  
How shall the heart be reconciled  
to its feast of losses?  
In a rising wind  
the manic dust of my friends,  
those who fell along the way,  
bitterly stings my face.  
Yet I turn, I turn,  
exulting somewhat,  
with my will intact to go  
wherever I need to go,  
and every stone on the road  
precious to me.  
In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered  
and I roamed through wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice  
directed me:  
"Live in the layers,  
not on the litter."  
Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.  
I am not done with my changes.

"Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide  
  
or press an ear against its hive.  
  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,  
  
or walk into a poem's room  
and feel along the wall for the light switch.  
  
I want them to waterski  
across the surface of the poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.  
  
But all they want to do is  
tie the poem to a chair with a rope  
and torture a confession out of it.  
  
They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means

805 by Emily Dickinson

This Bauble was preferred of Bees—  
By Butterflies admired  
At Heavenly—Hopeless Distances—  
Was justified of Bird—  
  
Did Noon—enamel—in Herself  
Was Summer to a Score  
Who only knew of Universe—  
It had created Her.

"Happiness" by A.A. Milne

John had  
Great Big  
Waterproof  
Boots on;  
John had a  
Great Big  
Waterproof  
Hat;  
John had a  
Great Big  
Waterproof  
Mackintosh--  
And that  
(Said John)  
Is  
That.

"Dreams" by Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams  
for if dreams die  
life is a broken winged bird  
that cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
for when dreams go  
life is a barren field  
frozen with snow.

"We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks

*Pool players.*  
*Seven at the Golden Shovel.*

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

[Popcorn Can Cover] by Lorine Niedecker

Popcorn-can cover  
screwed to the wall  
over a hole  
so the cold  
can't mouse in

"How to Eat a Poem" by Eve Merriam

Don't be polite.  
Bite in.  
Pick it up with your fingers and lick the juice that  
may run down your chin.  
It is ready and ripe now, whenever you are.  
You do not need a knife or fork or spoon  
or plate or napkin or tablecloth.

For there is no core  
or stem  
or rind  
or pit  
or seed  
or skin  
to throw away.

"Across The Back Fence" by Tracie Vaughan Zimmer

Mr. O'Brien  
(red brick house  
across the back fence)  
tries to train his grass--  
not his dog to fetch  
or his son Paul to pitch  
but one million blades of bluegrass--  
to behave!

Twice a week  
he cuts it down  
whips back the edges  
blows the cuttings and  
sweeps the strays.  
He even  
claps his shoes  
like dirty chalkboard erasers  
out in the street  
so the whiskers of grass  
can't follow him home.

I know I shouldn't  
but when the puffs of dandelions  
appear in our yard,  
I twist their rubbery stalks and  
blow the seeds  
light as snowflakes  
across the back fence.

"Rootless" by Michelle Brittan

Like a net my fingers skim  
tap water, cleaning mung bean sprouts  
the way you showed me.

From my palm I find the whole  
ones, fetal curvatures with scalps  
blossoming on tiny yellowed skulls.

My nail bisects the vertebrae  
from primordial tail, roots  
cast away in the sink.

Though I never learned  
the purpose, it's a habit that reminds me  
of a time you let me in.

"Famous" by Naomi Shihab Nye

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to the silence,  
which knew it would inherit the earth  
before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds  
watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

The idea you carry close to your bosom  
is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth,  
more famous than the dress shoe,  
which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it  
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men  
who smile while crossing streets,  
sticky children in grocery lines,  
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,  
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,  
but because it never forgot what it could do.

"Psalm" by George Oppen

*Veritas Sequitur*

In the small beauty of the forest  
The wild deer bedding down—  
That they are there!

Their eyes  
Effortless, the soft lips  
Nuzzle and the alien small teeth  
Tear at the grass

The roots of it  
Dangle from their mouths  
Scattering earth in the strange woods.  
They who are there.

Their paths  
Nibbled thru the fields, the leaves that shade them  
Hang in the distances  
Of sun

The small nouns  
Crying faith  
In this in which the wild deer  
Startle, and stare out.

"This Is Just To Say" by William Carlos Williams

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

"Alligator Pie" by Dennis Lee

Alligator pie, alligator pie,  
If I don't get some I think I'm gonna die.  
Give away the green grass, give away the sky,  
But don't give away my alligator pie.

Alligator stew, alligator stew,  
If I don't get some, I don't know what I'll do.  
Give away my furry hat, give away my shoe,  
But don't give away my alligator stew.

Alligator soup, alligator soup,  
If I don't get some, I think I'm gonna droop.  
Give away my hockey stick, give away my hoop,  
But don't give away my alligator soup.

"This Place" by Eloise Greenfield

There is this place I know  
where children go to find  
their deepest feelings  
they look behind the trees  
for hiding wants and angers  
bashful joys  
this place is quiet  
no shouts may enter  
no rolling laughter  
but only silent tears  
to carry the feelings  
forward in waves  
that wash the children  
whole

"Lullaby for a Daughter" By Jim Harrison

Go to sleep. Night is a coal pit  
full of black water--  
                    night's a dark cloud  
full of warm rain.

Go to sleep. Night is a flower  
resting from bees--  
                    night's a green sea  
swollen with fish.

Go to sleep. Night is a white moon  
riding her mare--  
                    night's a bright sun  
burned to black cinder.

Go to sleep,  
night's come,  
cat's day,  
owl's day,  
star's feast of praise,  
moon to reign over  
her sweet subject, dark.

"Afraid So" by Jeanne Marie Beaumont

Is it starting to rain?  
Did the check bounce?  
Are we out of coffee?  
Is this going to hurt?  
Could you lose your job?  
Did the glass break?  
Was the baggage misrouted?  
Will this go on my record?  
Are you missing much money?  
Was anyone injured?  
Is the traffic heavy?  
Do I have to remove my clothes?  
Will it leave a scar?  
Must you go?  
Will this be in the papers?  
Is my time up already?  
Are we seeing the understudy?  
Will it affect my eyesight?  
Did all the books burn?  
Are you still smoking?  
Is the bone broken?  
Will I have to put him to sleep?  
Was the car totaled?  
Am I responsible for these charges?  
Are you contagious?  
Will we have to wait long?  
Is the runway icy?  
Was the gun loaded?  
Could this cause side effects?  
Do you know who betrayed you?  
Is the wound infected?  
Are we lost?  
Can it get any worse?

"Between Walls" by William Carlos Williams

the back wings  
of the

hospital where  
nothing

will grow lie  
cinders

in which shine  
the broken

pieces of a green  
bottle



"Things to Do if You are the Sun" by Bobbi Katz

Let planets loop around you.  
Be Earth's very own star.  
Keep things warm enough for people.  
Keep things cool enough for penguins.  
Slip away to end the day.  
Light the moon at night.  
Let people and animals sleep.  
And at the crack of dawn,  
wake up the world!

"You Can't Have It All" by Barbara Ras

But you can have the fig tree and its fat leaves like clown hands  
gloved with green. You can have the touch of a single eleven-year-old finger  
on your cheek, waking you at one a.m. to say the hamster is back.  
You can have the purr of the cat and the soulful look  
of the black dog, the look that says, If I could I would bite  
every sorrow until it fled, and when it is August,  
you can have it August and abundantly so. You can have love,  
though often it will be mysterious, like the white foam  
that bubbles up at the top of the bean pot over the red kidneys  
until you realize foam's twin is blood.  
You can have the skin at the center between a man's legs,  
so solid, so doll-like. You can have the life of the mind,  
glowing occasionally in priestly vestments, never admitting pettiness,  
never stooping to bribe the sullen guard who'll tell you  
all roads narrow at the border.  
You can speak a foreign language, sometimes,  
and it can mean something. You can visit the marker on the grave  
where your father wept openly. You can't bring back the dead,  
but you can have the words *forgive* and *forget* hold hands  
as if they meant to spend a lifetime together. And you can be grateful  
for makeup, the way it kisses your face, half spice, half amnesia, grateful  
for Mozart, his many notes racing one another towards joy, for towels  
sucking up the drops on your clean skin, and for deeper thirsts,  
for passion fruit, for saliva. You can have the dream,  
the dream of Egypt, the horses of Egypt and you riding in the hot sand.  
You can have your grandfather sitting on the side of your bed,  
at least for a while, you can have clouds and letters, the leaping  
of distances, and Indian food with yellow sauce like sunrise.  
You can't count on grace to pick you out of a crowd  
but here is your friend to teach you how to high jump,  
how to throw yourself over the bar, backwards,  
until you learn about love, about sweet surrender,  
and here are periwinkles, buses that kneel, farms in the mind  
as real as Africa. And when adulthood fails you,  
you can still summon the memory of the black swan on the pond  
of your childhood, the rye bread with peanut butter and bananas  
your grandmother gave you while the rest of the family slept.  
There is the voice you can still summon at will, like your mother's,  
it will always whisper, you can't have it all,  
but there is this.